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AUTHOR Martin, Ruby W.
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ABSTRACT

Realistic goals for high school reading curricula for black students are discussed in this paper. A rationale and instructional design for high school reading programs with challenging intellectual content for black students is presented. Suggested principles for organization of high school reading programs for blacks to help them achieve in reading include the following: (1) teachers should not rely on outmoded programs to which new programs are tacked on; (2) emphasis should be placed on meeting the needs of the student in terms of helping him accomplish objectives with less emphasis on remediation or correction; (3) programs should be designed with challenging intellectual content; and (4) proper attention should be given to sequencing of materials, teaching style, and content of materials. (WR)

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TEACHING READING TO BLACK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: Realities and Fallacies

Ruby W. Martin

A new need for knowing more about reading programs for Black students in high school has resulted from the ever-increasing focus of attention on their problems.

The problems that Black high school students have with reading may not necessarily indicate poor reading skill. Causes of reading problems may be intellectual, physical, environmental/cultural, or they may stem from factors within the school. Only recently has attention been given to the latter potential cause.

In considering this topic several realities converged for me around the confusion about teaching black students:

1. The elements in the American educational system which actually contribute to the frustrations and poor achievement of Blacks.

2. The mystery which seems to enshroud the teaching of the disadvantaged, many of whom are black.

3. The nature of existing practices and also materials used in organization of reading

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programs and their implications for Blacks.

4. The need for improved pedagogy as core for organizing reading programs for Blacks.

5. Overemphasis, but paucity of research, on "dialect interference", the assumption that there are conflicts or distractions which Black dialect causes in reading the standard material.[1]

6. The confusion that exists among teachers concerning reading style and reading competence, e.g. an individual reading well, but not reporting it in the dialect in which the teacher is accustomed to hearing it.[2]

7. The lack of awareness of content area teachers, who simply do not know whether the students in their classes can read effectively or not.

Relative to the confusion and convictions about teaching black students are several reports which appear in print as early as 1960 and more recently. These reports were of interest to me

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[1]Richard A. Long, "Reading from the Perspective of Linguistics", unpublished paper, read at the Institute for Services to Education, Inc. Consortia Reading Specialist Conference, Washington, D. C., November 7-9, 1973.

[2]Ibid.

because they all are relative to answers we are seeking, even though themselves offer no clear-cut answers.

The first report is that of a study by Martin Deutsch[3] which has implications which seem to offer a justifiable indictment against the traditional American educational structure as it relates to Blacks.

In this study reported in the early sixties Deutsch has clearly documented several factors. He states that 1) cultural deprivation and educational deprivation are synonymous, reinforcing one another in their efforts, 2) schools help children incorporate into their value systems a belief in the importance of "equal opportunity" when paradoxically training them to accept a lower place; and 3) "that teachers and children in order to function within the contradictory requirements of our educational system, must accept in some degree, the existing discrepancy between the realistic and ideal functions of the school."[4]

For the black student then, this results in a feeling of inadequacy, at times perhaps a state of cognitive dissonance, and a lack of motivation which structures his total educational experience.

What is considered here is a white middle class oriented curriculum which Blacks have misgivings about and are programmed

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[3]Martin Deutsch, "Minority and Class Status as Related to Social and Personality Factors in Scholastic Achievement," Monograph No. 2. The Society for Applied Psychology, Ithaca, New York, 1960, p. 31.

[4]Ibid.

against. This psychological rejection of the educational process in many instances is often evaluated as their having cognitive, language, and perceptual deficits. These factors interact with cultural conflicts, the experiences of a segregated life, and psychological concomitants to perpetuate a vicious cycle of frustrating causes and effects in learning for black students. They also play a vital role in the development of the negative self image of black students--the poor concept they have of themselves, and that the school has of them, which in turn views this cycle in the severe retardation of black students.

Consequently, statistics of a typical college program in developmental reading for these students who enter as freshmen indicate that it is not a typical for black students to be graduated from high school with inadequate reading skills, with token grades--victims of an educational system which tends to mitigate gainst them.

It is indeed pitiable that it took "mounting pressures, threatened boycotts, legislative actions, national conventions, and a congressional hearing" to spread the light to textbook publishers and school systems for them to finally recognize truth as well as multiracial reality with the publication and adoption of texts"[5] that still are inadequate to teach black students to read.

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[5]U.S. House of Representatives, "Books for Schools and the Treatment of Minorities," Hearings Before the Ad Hoc Sub Committee on De Facto School Segregation of the Committee on Education and Labor, 89th Congress, August, 1966. (out of print)

There exists the practice in too many of this nation's high schools to provide a "compensatory" vocational tract for students classified as poor readers or underachievers. And consequently, disillusioned black high school students have a tendency to view blue collar or service jobs as their only hope for revival in a literary society, after graduation.

This of course is not a realistic solution to their problem. The Bureau of Labor Statistics continue to show that "the average college graduate earns much more during his lifetime than the usual high school graduate--$607,000 compared with $371,000." The figures also indicate that college graduates have greater job security "even during hard economic times." A report in 1971 showed that the unemployment rate for blue collar workers was 7.5 per cent; 6.4 per cent for service workers as compared with 3.2 per cent for professional and technical workers. The conclusion was made that a college education will be the best job insurance in the coming decade.[6]

In 1972 Research for Better Schools completed two studies of current practices in secondary schools. The research was conducted to:

1) augment the knowledge base before planning and designing an individualized developmental reading system for secondary level,

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[6]Cheryl M. Fields, "College Degree is Best Job Insurance," THE CHRONICLE, February 28, 1972, p. 2.

2) to ascertain directions of all state departments of education as indicated by requirements for teaching reading and by certification standards and,

3) to investigate current practices and needs of local school districts in those states.[7]

Findings revealed that secondary schools are still a long way from providing in reading what Gray suggested in 1948, "a program designed to promote maximum reading growth all high school students in keeping with their individual capacities and needs."[8]

Another fallacy that colors the views of teachers and other educators is that all minority group children are economically disadvantaged. This is not true, however, for many members of minority groups can and do enjoy the results of culturally and economically enriched environments.

Linguist Richard Long has identified an additional fallacy or problem which occurs in reading instruction, particularly with Blacks at all levels. Many people confuse "reading competence" with "reading style". For instance a child reads something and reads it well, but he does not report it in the dialect in which the teacher is accustomed to hearing it. The teacher in turn

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[7]Barbara F. Freed, "Secondary Reading--State of Arts," Journal of Reading, Vol. 17, No. 3, December 1973, pp. 195-201.

[8]Ronald Green, "Reading Programs in Secondary Schools." Occasional Papers in Reading, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University School of Education, 1967, p. 1.

tells the child, "that's not correct."

The confusion between reading style and reading competence according to Long "is widespread and generic and in every area in which there can be dialect interference it will come out."[9]

The result of dialectual interference can cause a psychological rejection of the whole reading process. This he recommends as an area for research, in order to separate dialect interference from deficiencies in reading competence, then they both can be treated differently, in terms of improvement of reading facility and in communication with the person about his problem. This is recommended as opposed to telling a black student that he is not reading, when in fact, he understands everything in front of him.

Federal monies in recent years have made provisions for many reading programs at every level kindergarten to college. But the fallacies in reading instruction among teachers and Black students at the high school level remain unchanged.

The paradoxical situations, considered with the fact that 55 per cent of the black students who enter college as freshmen do not graduate presents a dilemna with no easy solution.[10] When planning reading programs for high school Blacks teachers should be ever cognizant of the existence of adverse effects in

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[9] Long.

[10] Elias Blake, Jr., "Future Leadership Roles for Predominantly Black Colleges and Universities in American Higher Education," DAEDALUS, The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. 100, No. 3, P. 747.

their environmental backgrounds and in our educational system which are operating against them.

Certain principals are proposed here that will allow for organization of high school reading programs for Blacks so that they can achieve in spite of imposed handicaps.

High school teachers of reading cannot rely upon out-moded programs to which new programs are tacked on to do the job for them. Such programs are usually based upon educators' search for that one method by which to teach these children.

The greatest advantage in structuring these programs is a careful evaluation of the published research and observation of programs now in progress which seem to be consistent with their learning styles and backgrounds, and also show potential for their making progress in reading.

Emphasis should be placed upon meeting the needs of the student in terms of helping him accomplish his objectives with less emphasis upon "remediation" or "correction". Students detest these terms and many do not wish to be associated with programs identified as such.

A catalyst for change which supports this philosophy in higher education for Blacks is the Institute for Services to Education, Inc. The organization is founded on the principal that education today requires a fresh examination of what is worth teaching and how to teach it.

The ISE believes and supports the philosophy that a program should be designed with challenging intellectual content, which also works on the language skills of Black high school and college students. They feel that both of these things can be done if proper attention is paid to sequencing of materials, teaching style, and content of materials.

Those at the institute are somewhat opposed to reducing reading to its pure form, for this increases pedagogical problems. "Reading must be organically related to something: we read mathematics; we read art; we read the humanities."[11]

A powerful force which black high school teachers must face is that a substantial problem of reading the printed page is the wide range of ways in which individuals can deal with information and master it in a media-dominated society.

The need and challenge is to incorporate reading as a functioning complement to high school programs to improve the quality of students coming to college.

Reading problems as they exist above the junior high level are indeed complex and for the most part the high school teacher neither recognizes or knows how to handle them.

The data in a study by Braam and Walker[12] indicated "that most of the subject area teachers are unaware of the majority

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[11]Elias Blake, Jr., Unpublished Introductory Remarks, the ISE Consortia Reading Specialist Conference, Washington, D. C. November 7-9, 1973.

[12]Leonard S. Braam and James E. Walker. "Subject Teachers' Awareness of Reading Skills," Journal of Reading. May 1973. pp. 608-611.

of reading skills needed by students to read successfully in the various disciplines." And it was conclused that communication between reading experts and classroom teachers is no more effective today than it was eight years ago.

But an aspect of reading which is currently receiving the attention it deserves is the performance in the content areas, the interdisciplinary nature of reading, and the interdisciplinary communication established among content teachers and reading teachers. This relationship lends itself to making content teachers and reading teachers mutually supportive in the teaching-learning process.

Research reveals that visual perceptual functioning is basic to verbal skills, cognitive development and intelligence.

According to S. Allen Cohen, perceptual dysfunction is a major problem among disadvantaged children of all sub-cultures.[13]

He also states "it is true that disadvantaged, as a group, manifests certain negative psychosocial, psychophysical and cognitive factors to a greater degree than do most advantaged children."[14]

The writer agrees with this author that the breakthrough in the teaching of reading to these students "will come if we concentrate on the methodology of teaching, rather than the causes of the "disadvantaged children."[15]

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[13] S. Allen Cohen, Teach Them to Read, Theory, Methods and Materials for Teaching the Disadvantaged, Random House, New York, p 97

Evidence from two schools of thought on approaches for teaching psysiological readiness to the disadvantaged have strong implications for teaching black students. Both sides indicate that perceptual-motor and linguistic experiences should be provided for them.

It seems imperative that once the initial associative skills are learned, that the reading program provide experiences for development of cognitive skills.

The approach of assisting black students to extend their language in getting them to evaluate ideas, learn cause and effect relationships, predict outcomes, handle a sequence of increasingly more complex problems. This could be reinforced through extended learnings through reading for pleasure in subjects of interest and also writing.

There is no monopoly on the use of language-experience centers in elementary and junior high. They can be very useful for high school black youngsters if an integrated approach for teaching reading and writing is used. Conversations centering around "give and take" on subjects of interest incorporated with the language experience approach can be very helpful in getting them to express their thoughts orally first, then writing them.

Reinforcement in word study can be extended from their own experiences to how other writers use words to express the same thought.

It is also helpful to tap students' interests by taking a survey as to what they are interested in. This information can be best used by incorporating materials geared toward their interest with the content of what is to be studied in content areas.

With research geared toward the study of the significance of the students' ambitions and self-concept and to the self expectations of students,[16] there is a trend toward counseling-oriented practices.

Spache[17] identifies two posutlates as practical. He is also of the opinion that counseling oriented programs represent the most advanced in the development of the college adult fields. Implications are here for improved high school reading programs for Black students.

The following organisational patterns are suggested by the ISE Reading Committee[18] as possible programs to be considered in overhauling the high school and college curricula to bring teaching more in consonance with the learning styles of black high school students:

1) A general communication skills component involving both expressive and receptive skills using a team teaching approach.

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[16]David M. Wark, "Twenty-five Years of Research on Adult Reading," in Philosophical and Sociological Bases of Reading. Fourteenth Yearbook, National Reading Conference, 1965, p. 218-231.

[17]George D. Spache, "College-Adult Reading--Past, Present and Future, The Psychology of Reading Behavior, Eighteenth Yearbook of the National Reading Conference, 1969, p. 191.

[18]The Institute for Services to Education Reading Committee "General Report on Reading," (unpublished) The ISE Summer Conference, Pine Manor Jr. College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. July, 1972, pp. 4-5.

2) A specific reading course involving the discovery method in large groups, small groups, and individiualized instruction for developing, extending and enriching skills in a cooperative arrangement with each of the content teachers involved in the program.

3) A reading program which is "service" in nature and which operates on a referral basis, utilizing reading teachers, counselors and content teachers.

4) A resource center approach in which the reading teacher works with specified content teachers for skill development and application.

5) A reading center approach which makes available clinical or laboratory instruction as needed using visual and auditory learning systems to enrich, enhance, and develop reading skills in cooperation with content teachers.

6) An individual contract performance approach for advanced or average students who might benefit from independent study in specific content or skill areas.

7) A mini-course approach involving six-week or three-week short courses in Phonology, Linguistics and Reading, The Writing Road to Reading, Building Word Power, the Fundamentals of Thinking, Basic Comparehension Skills, Advanced Comprehension Skills, Rate Improvement, etc.

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